

Faith in the Workplace

Musical therapist views profession as a vocation

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

PENFIELD — While working as a musical-therapist intern in a Cleveland hospital, Joanne M. Tango was told an elderly woman had requested that she come to her room.

Tango was reluctant to do so for some reason, she recalled. In part, she acknowledged that as a white Catholic raised in upstate New York, she didn't know if she could connect with the black, Southern Baptist woman who had suffered a stroke two weeks earlier.

When she finally visited the woman's room, Tango performed traditional hymns, including "Amazing Grace" and "This Little Light of Mine," for the woman whose family members, including several grandchildren, joined in singing.

"The nurses said that was the first time she smiled since the stroke," Tango recalled during an April 27 presentation for the Morningglory Support Group at St. Joseph's Church, 43 Gebhardt Road. The group, which meets the fourth Thursday of every month, helps its members deal with bereavement issues through various programs and speakers.

In that moment before the woman and her family, Tango

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said she experienced an "Aha!" moment — as in "Aha! It's not the musician, it's the music that help makes connections with patients."

"To me, music is life," said Tango, who also uses her musical talents as organist at St. Helen's Church in Gates. "Drums and flutes were the first inventions in every culture, and people always sang. With drums and flutes, people have recognized that breath is the rhythm of life."

Currently employed as a music therapist in the Psychiatric Center at Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital, Tango explained to the Morningglory group — and in a follow-up interview — that her therapy uses music for non-musical goals that help people suffering both physical and mental ills.

Music can be used to lessen people's pain when they are sick, increase their self-esteem and their ability to relate to others, and it can be used to aid mentally ill patients articulate their condition, she said.

In her work at Strong, Tango meets with patients in both group and one-on-one settings.

In a group setting, she might conduct a lyrical discussion about the Whitney Houston pop hit "The Greatest Love of All." By listening to and discussing the song celebrating self-esteem, patients can talk about what's good in themselves, she said.

On the other hand, working one-on-one with patients might entail anything from simply giving guitar lessons to using music to help patients open up about their problems, she said.

She recalled one female patient who had suffered sexual and physical abuse and who played for Tango the tape of a performer who had shared her own abusive experiences with her audience in a concert setting.

"She began to communicate and talk to the staff people because of the tape, whereas in other situations she wouldn't," Tango observed.

Although she can't broach the subject of faith with a patient, many of her patients bring up the subject with her, she said, noting that she sees her profession as a spiritual vocation. If the patients wish to talk about God or other spiritual matters, Tango is more than willing to listen, she noted.

Tango brings to her work a wealth of knowledge about many worlds. Aspiring music therapists must study the performance, theory and history of music along with its physics and sound properties, she said. In addition to their musical



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Music Therapist Joanne Tango leads the Morningglory Support Group in song during an April 27 presentation at St. Joseph's Church in Penfield. She sees her profession as a spiritual vocation.

studies, aspiring therapists must also take classes in psychology, human sciences, and such general education courses as dance and art.

Tango, 41, graduated from the State University of New York at New Paltz in 1992 with a bachelor's degree in music therapy. During an interview, she acknowledged that it took her several years to find what she now considers her true vocation. Many of those years were spent dealing with personal issues and health problems that held her back from achieving her true potential, she said.

"I really didn't see the world in colors," she remarked. "It was all black and gray."

Gradually, however, a combination of her Catholic faith, supportive friends, and participation in various programs helped her overcome her problems, she said, and by the late 1980s she had discerned her desire to be a music therapist. Tango had worked in human services as a young woman and found that music therapy combined her love of song with her

interest in people.

Tango started singing and playing the organ at a young age, and through her many years searching for a meaningful profession, she served the church as parish organist and as choir director. Playing songs that illuminate such items of faith as the Scriptures means much to Tango.

"I just don't feel that like I'm getting all that I can if I'm not sharing (liturgical) music," she said.

Today, she still enjoys hearing comments from churchgoers who compliment her when she plays a familiar hymn that brings smiles to their faces or tears to their eyes. She experiences similar moments when one of her patients responds positively to a beloved ballad, and she hailed music as one of life's most potent healers.

"I do believe that the power of music could help people where they're at," Tango said.

She added that the best music needs no explanation.

"It's not only something that can be heard with the ears," she said, "but felt with the heart."

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